

W F A Y E T T E Woman™

Lisa Williams Rescues Atlanta's Lost and Forgotten

By Nichole Bazemore , Fayette Woman February 8, 2011
Page 1 of 3

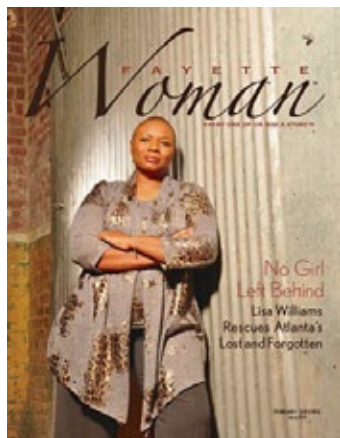


Photo by Marie Thomas

Lisa Williams remembers the first girl who walked through the door of this house, nestled snugly in the hills of a sleepy Georgia town. The 13 year-old, handcuffed and wearing leg shackles, had been arrested for child prostitution. Young, bound, and helpless, the “baby,” as Williams calls her, was a painfully real example of something that, until that moment, she had only read about.

Years earlier, in 2004, Williams had read about two other girls just like this one in an article in the Atlanta Journal-Constitution. “Selling Atlanta’s Children” profiled the commercial sexual exploitation of two sisters – one ten and one eleven years of age. Both the article and photo still haunt Williams today. “There was a photo of the girl from the knees down; she was in orange flip-flops and shackles—a ten year-old girl. She was waiting to go before the judge. Her eleven



Lisa Williams with Former Ambassador Andrew Young in his Downtown Atlanta office discussing Living Water for Girls.

year-old sister was scheduled to go before the judge next.”

More disturbing than the picture was what brought the girls before

the judge in the first place: they had been arrested and were being prosecuted for prostitution. But the men who had victimized them – the pimps who had sold them and the men who had bought them – were not mentioned anywhere in the article. The thought of the children being victimized and subsequently criminalized was more than Williams could bear. “I thought, ‘someone was selling her and someone was buying her, and now she’s shackled.’ Nowhere in the article did it say the pimp was charged.”

Lisa Williams with Former Ambassador Andrew Young in his Downtown Atlanta office discussing Living Water for Girls. Outraged, Williams contacted the office of then-Atlanta Mayor Shirley Franklin to see what she could do. Afterward, she got on the phone to mobilize what she calls her “circle of influence.” She asked her contacts to fly into Atlanta and “bring their purses.” Friends flew in from seven states, eager to hear what had so deeply disturbed their friend on such a personal, moral, and emotional level. They gathered at an Atlanta venue where Williams told them about the article and appealed to them to take action to bring awareness to and work to stop the commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC). “I said, ‘if you’re not outraged, you can leave now. Go back to your communities and find out where the problem is. I’ll handle it here.’”

Lisa began to research CSEC and in 2006, founded Living Water for Girls (LWG), an organization which is dedicated to the

mental, emotional, and spiritual rehabilitation of girls between the ages of 12 and 17 who have been rescued from the commercial sex trade.

Now, four years and more than a quarter of a million dollars in donations later, LWG operates on a seven-acre wooded compound, a haven for those girls. After they are found – most often, only after being arrested for prostitution – Lisa and her team of counselors rescue and bring them here.

When I met Lisa on a cold, sunny day in December, she recalled her first baby’s reaction the day she arrived at the LWG refuge. “She was facing the wall as the officer patted her down. I heard the sound of heavy chains hitting the floor. Finally, she turns around and she’s smiling. I ask why she’s smiling. She says, ‘It’s so beautiful here.’”

Here, in this house on the hill, under the watchful eye of loving clinical social workers, counselors, and Williams herself, the girls, who she calls her “babies,” diligently, patiently work to exchange the shattered pieces of their childhood for something of beauty. Beauty that eventually, hopefully, will outshine the horrors of the lives they left behind.

A Problem Lurking on our Doorstep

Human sex trafficking is more profitable than the drug industry. By conservative estimates, it generates more than \$13 billion a year. According to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, an estimated 300,000

Lisa Williams Rescues Atlanta's Lost and Forgotten

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Page 2 of 3



Living Water for Girls' gathering room. This is where girls gather to talk about their day and where they greet visitors.

American children – girls and boys – are sold into the commercial sex trade each year.

How do children end up being sold into sexual slavery? Most commonly, as runaways. Williams stresses that in more than three-quarters of cases where children run away, they are running from something, like domestic abuse. Other children, known as “throwaways,” in law enforcement circles, are forced from their homes by parents or other relatives. Once on the street, the children – hungry, scared, and vulnerable – can become victims of CSEC in less than 48 hours. Increasingly, the internet is making it easier for pedophiles to befriend and lure child victims. Williams, who works regularly with federal law enforcement to arrest and prosecute sex offenders, notes that pedophiles can buy and sell children online in about three seconds.

And it's happening right under our noses: Atlanta, home of Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport, the world's busiest, provides sex offenders easy access to our

children. According to federal law enforcement officials, pedophiles can simply scour the internet for sites dedicated to the proliferation of CSEC, specify what type of child they want to purchase, fly into Atlanta, commit the crime, and fly back out.

But while pedophiles do fly into Atlanta from other states, they sometimes are people the victims know and trust. People in our very own communities.

Williams tells a particularly disturbing story about a CSEC victim from a middle-class, two-parent household in an Atlanta suburb. At age eight, the child was befriended and later raped by a man in her neighborhood. The child told her mother, who doubted the story. When the girl turned nine, her rapist sold her to other men in the neighborhood – other fathers—and eventually sold her to a pimp. By the time the child turned eleven, she had been a stripper in a club and had had eight pimps. Working with Williams and federal law enforcement, the girl identified her abuser. He is currently being held on a million dollar bond and the case is now scheduled to go before a federal jury. Relieved, Williams says, “Somehow, this young girl got the courage to testify.”

Unfortunately, testifying against their oppressors is something that victims of CSEC rarely do. According to Williams, girls are brainwashed early on to defend and identify with their oppressors, a phenomenon which is known in psychology as “The Stockholm Syndrome.” In fact, oftentimes,

after a girl is arrested, a pimp will have other girls arrested and jailed in order to deliver threats to her to keep quiet – or else.

It's that fear of reprisal, against their loved ones in many cases, which causes many girls arriving at LWG to regard this safe haven as a prison at first. “They try to figure out how to run, because they've been conditioned to believe that nothing is free,” Williams says. To ease that fear, she and her staff try to make the girls feel as comfortable as possible. First, the girls take a tour of the home to get acquainted with it and see that there are no handcuffs or traps anywhere. Many have been handcuffed, caged, and tortured in ways we cannot imagine.

Lisa Williams was honored as a ‘Woman of Worth’ by L’Oreal Paris for her work with Living Water for Girls.

Next, the girls are offered a hot meal, a hot shower, and clean clothes. Each girl is given her own set of luggage to replace the black trash bags in which she brought her belongings. Each is also given a comfort quilt, made by Williams' friend and LWG volunteer Kathie Hansen. “The quilts symbolize the hope there is for the children who came to reside at LWG,” Hansen says. “The scraps had been thrown in the trash but were rescued and made into something beautiful... like the girls who have been treated in much the same way.”

Throughout the house, on nearly every wall, are affirmations and Biblical Scriptures, all written in cursive, feminine fonts in pastel

Lisa Williams Rescues Atlanta's Lost and Forgotten

By Nichole Bazemore, Fayette Woman February 8, 2011
Page 3 of 3



One of two of Living Water for Girls' bedrooms, a safe and beautiful refuge for girls.

colors. On one wall hangs an oil on canvas, a woman's silhouette, painted in yellow, green, and pink. It features verses from Proverbs 31, "The Virtuous Woman." Says Williams, "I tell my babies, 'I don't care whatever names they've assigned you out there, but you are beautiful and virtuous.' One day, I want them to realize they are virtuous women."

To prepare them for womanhood,



One of two of Living Water for Girls' bedrooms, a safe and beautiful refuge for girls.

the girls are given a lot of responsibility. Their day begins at 7 a.m. and ends at 9 p.m. "Part of healing is learning to give to other people," Williams says. "I

don't want them to have a free pass because of what has happened to them." The girls make their own meals and clean their own rooms. They also give back to the community: they tend a vegetable garden and share the harvest with a local senior citizens' facility. They make quilts for babies in neonatal care.

In addition to their chores and community work, the children receive various types of therapy, including equine, art, writing, photography, and horticulture. Six days a week, the girls are homeschooled by a staff of certified teachers. To help the girls catch up on their studies, one county school district supplied LWG with 12 brand new laptops, Rosetta Stone language software, and headphones.

In fact, donors and volunteers throughout Georgia have stepped up to provide LWG with everything it needs—from money to purchase the house to furniture and appliances—to stay afloat. Churches have been especially generous, but Williams says she's working to mobilize people in other areas of society, such as fraternities and sororities, to help raise awareness about CSEC. "It's not a Christian issue, it's not a black and white issue. It's a human issue," she says.

Ben Smith, Minister of Outreach at First Baptist Church of Woodstock, met Lisa through someone at his church and immediately recruited volunteers to support the fight against CSEC. Like Williams, he is particularly troubled by the criminalizing of CSEC victims. He believes more needs to be done to

educate people about how children end up in that terrible lifestyle. "They could be abducted," he says. "Your 12 or 13 year-old could get emotional and run away from home. Maybe they're not planning to be gone long, but they could be kidnapped and you can't find them. It seems like the only way they're found is if they're arrested," he adds.

Williams agrees. In the six years since she first read about the ten year-old girl in the AJC, little has changed in how victims of CSEC are perceived by law enforcement. That, she says, must change if the problem is going to be eradicated. "The most important thing is that people realize these are children.

They're girls. People exchange the word 'girls' for 'women,' but these are children. This is not a choice. They're traumatized, brutalized, and victimized. There is no black and white. You're either part of the problem or part of the solution." In December 2010, Lisa Williams was honored as a 'Woman of Worth' by L'Oreal Paris for her work with Living Water for Girls. Williams was one of ten women from across the United States who was recognized for her volunteer achievements and contributions to her community.

To keep LWG afloat, Williams needs your help. She has launched "The 10 for 10 Campaign," where the goal is for 10,000 people to donate \$10 to LWG. Those funds will help to sustain LWG's educational and rehabilitation services for two full years. To learn more about CSEC or to donate, visit livingwaterforgirls.org.